DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 583 CS 509 376

AUTHOR LeBlanc, H. Paul III
TITLE Building the House: Examples of Multi-Method Research in Communication.
PUB DATE 24 Nov 96
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (82nd, San Diego, CA, November 23-26, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; Higher Education; Interviews; Research Design; *Research Methodology
IDENTIFIERS *Research Suggestions

ABSTRACT

Although researchers and scholars have extolled the virtues of multi-method approaches to research by triangulation for at least two decades, implementation of these approaches to research has been slow. This is due primarily to the complexities inherent in the combination of different orders of data, theoretical constructs, and methodological assumptions. This paper provides examples from the author's own research, as well as from others, of implementations of multiple methods in communication research. The paper offers suggestion for implementation to researchers interested in conducting multi-method research. The paper also demonstrates how being conversant on multiple methods may allow the researcher to discover serendipitously unexamined aspects of the phenomena. Contains 13 references. (Author/RS)

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Building the House:

Examples of Multi-method Research in Communication

H. Paul LeBlanc III

Southern Illinois University

Department of Speech Communication

Paper presented at the eighty-second annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Diego, CA, November 24, 1996

CS 509376

Running head: MULTI-METHOD RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Although researchers and scholars have extolled the virtues of multi-method approaches to research by triangulation for at least two decades (see Denzin, 1978), implementation of these approaches to research has been slow. This is due primarily the complexities inherent in the combination of different orders of data, theoretical constructs, and methodological assumptions. This paper provides examples from the author's own research, as well as from others, of implementations of multiple methods in communication research. The paper offers suggestions for implementation to researchers interested in conducting multi-method research. The paper also demonstrates how being conversant in multiple methods may allow the researcher to discover serendipitously unexamined aspects of the phenomena.

Building the House:

Examples of Multi-method Research in Communication

When an owner looks at his or her new home, the owner may or may not understand the specialized knowledge required to build the house which makes the home. To construct a modern house, several competencies are necessary. Carpenters are needed to build the frame. Pipefitters are needed to install the plumbing. Electricians are needed to lay the wiring. Bricklayers are needed to veneer the side of the house or to build the fireplace. Each of these competencies include specialized knowledge of the tools required. Hammers and saws are the proper tools for the carpenter, and wrenches are used by pipefitters. A pipewrench would not be of much use in the carpenter's trade.

These activities must follow a plan laid out by the architect and a procedure specified by the site foreman. If these procedures do not follow the plan in proper sequence, the house will not stand. The roof cannot be constructed, nor can the wiring be laid before the frame is built. Neither of these activities can occur until the foundation has been laid.

Conducting research is analogous to constructing a house. Several competencies are necessary in order to reach the end product, a wholistic explanation of a phenomenon: a vision of the whole house. Within the discipline

of communication, several distinct methods can and have been employed. This breadth of methodological competency is necessary based on the complexities of the communicative process. One approach to research does not suffice. As Petronio and Braithwaite point out, "The exigencies of studying family communication lead to . . . multiple methods that are sensitive to the characteristics and limitations of studying families" (1993, p. 103). Building a house with just a hammer as a tool is impossible. Building a theory to explain human communication in the context of the family requires many methods. The multi-method perspective purports as a fundamental strategy to approach research problems with a multitude of tools " . . . that have non-overlapping weaknesses in addition to complementary strengths" (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 17). As it is important to follow a plan of construction, several research projects have been conducted over the last few years which attempt to approach a phenomenon from different perspectives.

In an earlier essay, I laid a philosophical foundation for methodological triangulation in communication research (LeBlanc, 1995b). In the earlier essay, I described the relationship between phenomena (or the objects of inquiry), the observer, and the observer's attempts at explanation through theory building. I also offered a pragmatic argument which specified the necessity of different methodological approaches in studying human communication using an example

of family conflict. In that essay, I proposed that a triangulation of methods subsumes alternative perspectives of communication.

After laying the foundation for conducting multi-method research, the next step in describing the process of research includes providing the plan and order of activities, which is the responsibility of the site foreman or supervisor. In this essay, I describe the process of building the whole house through multi-method and multi-methodological research. I provide examples from previous research and discuss the procedures for implementing multi-method approaches in future research. I also discuss some of the insights into conducting research gained through an appreciation of the breadth of tools available to researchers in the discipline of communication.

Research by Design

The first step in the research process is choosing a topic. This step employs many subtle choices which result from personal experiences, such as observations about the world and particular phenomena, previous research, and guidance from others. The selection of a topic does not occur in isolation from the whole of experience. Yet, to select a topic the researcher must synthesize these experiences into a whole. In a sense, the researcher selects a set of similar experiences to which he or she pays attention. This selection is not unlike

choosing a style for a house. Many styles of houses may have been observed throughout life, but some styles are personally more intriguing than others.

Lay the groundwork: research usually if not always begins with an initial wondering about a context or phenomena. Ask the question about how you asked the question. First questions in the mind of the researcher are usually formed as, "I wonder if . . ." or "It seems that . . ." Seek initial data as validation of the question. Determine the phenomenal basis for the initial question.

When one sets upon building a house, or conducting research, one must devise a plan. The planning phase begins with a visit to the architect who asks a series of questions about the style of the house, what components or rooms must be included, what basic layout is desired, and what paths and access ways would make the house more livable. The architect then sets upon designing the blueprints upon which the builders rely for guidance.

When one sets upon engaging in the research endeavor, one must ask a series of questions about the chosen topic such as: a) what previous research has been conducted which might shed light on the topic, b) how might I best observe this phenomena, c) what kind of possible explanations are there for what is observed, and d) what can be achieved by the research endeavor. By answering these types of questions, the research can set about designing a research project

which both meets the needs for explanation and serves to build theory. Ultimately, the researcher must seek the end goal: the theory, the house.

Once the groundwork has been laid, determine the tools necessary to answer the initial question and subsequent questions, including the research questions or hypotheses as well as the further questions for the program of study. Determine if the parts of the process are to be conducted together (within one study or set of studies) or separately. Such a determination should be based on a number of factors: a) what kind of tools do the resulting stages require, b) do these tools easily integrate, and c) do the use of these tools in combination require a particular order.

The kinds of tools necessary for a research project or program of study rely heavily on several factors. First, the researcher must determine if any research has been conducted previously which answers the initial questions, and if so what is the nature of that research. Much early research in interpersonal communication drew from psychological and sociological research and theory. Our discipline's historical reliance upon such work was necessary to lay a foundation. However, recent work in communication has shown the weaknesses of such reliance. The unit of measurement in psychology is the individual, and the unit of measurement in sociology is the society. The research of the past two decades in communication has shown that when one focuses the unit of

measurement upon the dyad, triad or family, the transactional nature of communication within that context demonstrates that the whole is greater than the sum of the psychological parts and that the history of the relationship displays idiosyncrasies which are distinct from the more global cultural traits of society. Therefore, examination of previous research should ask the question: what data has been collected that is specifically grounded in the transactional nature of communication.

If previous research has not observed specifically communication phenomena, then the researcher should design the first stage to do so. Observation of communication allows the researcher to consider the function of types of behavior within the context of relationship. These functions can be categorized and applied as criteria for explanation of phenomena. However, these criteria cannot or should not be applied without consideration of relational subtext. For example, the function of certain moves within a conversation may demonstrate how the participants ratify or co-construct meaning and thus cooperate in the relationship. These functions may also demonstrate communication rules endorsed in the relationship. Yet, observation of a communication event alone does not speak to the history and future direction of a relationship. It is a snap-shot, or a static drawing of the relationship. Therefore,

observation of communication should be seen as an important first step in the research endeavor.

If initial observational research has been conducted which specifies the functions of communication phenomena under consideration, then the researcher should determine if such functions or categories of functions are useful for explaining the topic of inquiry. When a categorical schema is applied to the context of family communication, the researcher should consider the subtext of the family. A useful method for making such a determination is the interview. Interviews allow the researcher to examine what meaning individuals or groups make out of their experiences. Interviews can be conducted with individuals, which may be necessary depending on the nature of the questions and the results sought, or they can be conducted with relational partners. This second type of interview allows for the interviewer to observe the co-construction of meaning while the interviewees are answering questions about meaning, thus the multi-party interview contains multiple levels of analysis.

Observation of communication phenomena coupled with the determination of meaning for participants creates a rich set of data from which explanation can be derived. The next step in theory building involves the application of such explanation across groups and contexts. To measure the generalizability of an explanation requires an application of that explanation to a larger group, perhaps

to a sample of similar individuals or groups. Surveys and questionnaires allow the researcher to test the generalizability of an explanation. Yet, questionnaires must be developed which meet the standard of validity: they must measure what they purport to measure. Combined observational and interview research serves as an ideal way to determine the structure and content of a questionnaire. That is, the tactics and strategies used by individuals transacting with each other should ground the items on the questionnaire. Once developed, a questionnaire should be piloted and further studies should be replicated to determine the reliability of the instrument.

Often survey instruments can be used to gather data which can provide subtext for observational studies. For example, knowledge about the attitudes of research subjects can assist the researcher in making determinations about the strategies being employed. If attitudes need to be determined first as part of the development of subtext, quantitative measures may provide the best means for accessing them. In these research designs, it is paramount that the instrument has been validated previously.

If quantitative measures are to be employed in a multi-method study, two issues must be addressed. If attitudes of a small group such as a family are to be measured as a step in a larger study, particularly if that step is earlier in the process, then the measure has to be employed with the target group. Whereas

sample size is critical for quantitative studies in a way that is not critical for qualitative studies, if a small group of families are targeted for the final research steps, then the reliability and validity of the quantitative instrument must have been determined in previous studies. If it has not, then a separate, prior study must be conducted using that instrument.

Combining quantitative measurement techniques such as survey instruments or questionnaires with qualitative techniques such as observing and interviewing begs the question of commonality between the constructs of the instrument and the functions derived from observation. Furthermore, such a combination also begs the question of what comes first in the research process: induction or deduction. As I argued in the earlier essay (LeBlanc, 1995b), the answer is both come first in a form of abduction. The researcher cannot be an unmotivated participant; the research act entails intent. Also, combining methods to derive and test constructs allows the researcher to test his or her own explanation against competing theories.

The order of the use of techniques, as argued above, depends upon previous research which has been conducted on the topic. Questionnaires can be used in a first step provided certain conditions, including the demonstrated validity of the instrument, are met. Other conditions include whether previous research has been grounded in observation of naturally-occurring communication

episodes or whether the meanings derived from participation in such episodes have been explored.

Working Examples of Multi-method Research

The following examples of research utilizing a multi-method, and in some cases multi-methodological, approach begin from different starting points and utilize different tools. Below are examples from the published work of other authors, as well as research that I have conducted and presented. I have also included examples from my current research which illustrate research design in progress. I have included examples from research into the family context as well as organizations which have "family" characteristics.

In the first example, Leach and Braithwaite (1996) used a two step design to investigate the activities of family kinkeepers. The first step in their research was to ascertain who kinkeepers were. To achieve this goal, the researchers utilized a survey instrument to identify family kinkeepers and the communication activities of these individuals in their kinkeeping roles. The information derived from the first step provided basic information about the activities of kinkeepers and the outcomes of those activities for the family. However, the first study instigated further questions about the nature of those activities which necessitated a more in-depth approach.

The second step in the Leach and Braithwaite (1996) study involved utilizing diaries of family kinkeepers and conducting interviews based on the diary entries. The researchers requested kinkeepers, identified from the first study, to keep a diary of kinkeeping activities that were guided by a series of questions derived from the results of the first study. The researchers then explored in more depth with the participants the entries in their diaries. The goal of the study was to identify the patterns of family kinkeeping behaviors. This research design utilized a survey instrument first, followed by interviews.

In another example, Treadwell and Harrison (1994) utilized interviews and questionnaires, but in the opposite order from the above example. In their study, the researchers wanted to assess the organizational image of a "religiously affiliated liberal arts college." The first step involved interviewing 29 faculty, staff and students to elicit descriptions and narratives about the organization. The researchers then analyzed the responses and coded the responses as a series of statements. These statements were then reduced to non-duplicative themes which were subjected to a Q-sort technique to derive the most representative statements.

Respondents who participated in the Q-sort were asked to complete a questionnaire which measured demographics and variables including commitment to the organization. The results of the Q-sort and the responses to the questionnaire were then compared to ascertain differences between groups

regarding organizational image. In this example, the researchers "quantified" interview data. Thus the research design was multi-methodological by syncretizing quantitative and qualitative paradigms.

One distinction that has been made between quantitative and qualitative research designs is that quantitative methods excel in assessing and generalizing attitudes of a population sample, whereas qualitative methods excel in describing the meaning of phenomena as they are experienced by individuals. Using information gathered regarding attitudes can assist the researcher in examining the communicative behaviors of relational partners. In a previous study (LeBlanc, 1994), I examined the characteristics of communication which define marital relationships within the context of family.

The basic design of the study involved interviewing two married couples about their beliefs and perceptions about communication in their relationship. As well, I employed a questionnaire and elicited responses on marital type descriptions. The marital type descriptions were utilized in a study by Honeycutt, Woods and Fontenot which were derived from previous research by Fitzpatrick. The questionnaire utilized in this study was developed in previous research by Noller, Seth-Smith, Bouma and Schweiter. Both instruments were judged to be valid and reliable. These instruments were used to validate the interpretations derived from the interview sessions (see Copeland & White, 1991).

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At times the use of quantitative techniques for model validation are limited by the number and scope of currently available instruments. Often, an instrument has to be created to measure constructs that have not been previously measured, or have not been measured in a way useful to the researcher's current agenda. In an ongoing study, I have constructed a questionnaire to measure family members' attitudes about rule following and rule endorsement (LeBlanc, 1996b). Using the model of communication rules developed by Shimanoff, the questionnaire measures attitudes on rules which may be specific to the family context. The questionnaire also requests responses about rule-makers and the roles of family members in the following and endorsement of rules. Data has been collected, and it is hoped that the findings will suggest a model for interpreting the transaction of families in future observational research.

In another study, I utilized a three-method process which included an audio-taped interaction, a questionnaire about the interaction and follow-up interview (LeBlanc, 1993). The audio-taped interaction was an unplanned naturally-occurring conversation and was described by family members as talk for talk's sake. The conversation occurred when the daughter returned home from work and began to describe her work activities to her parents as they were preparing supper. I discussed the research method in advance with the daughter and requested that she discuss the request for a taped family interaction with her

parents well in advance. The conversation was reported by participants to be highly personal and satisfying. Within an hour of the conversation, the three participants in the family interaction completed the Family Communication Report questionnaire developed by Duck. The questionnaire assisted in the assessment of the family interaction by reporting attitudes and perceptions about the interaction from each individual participant independently. Approximately ten days after the interaction, I conducted a follow-up interview with the daughter. The interview was conducted to assess the meaning the daughter placed on the interaction after-the-fact. This research design allowed for an in-depth assessment of a family interaction.

As suggested above, often researchers do not have the luxury of utilizing a previously developed and validated survey instrument. In some cases, experimental design necessitates development of an instrument to meet the goals of a particular study. In one such study, Motley and Reeder (1995), interviewed twelve subjects to determine resistance messages. The results of the interview were used to construct a questionnaire with specific types of potential resistance messages which were geared toward a specific context, in this case unwanted escalation of sexual intimacy.

In this particular study, the use of the questionnaire allowed the researchers to build a case. The "building of the case," however, involved several

steps. Participants in the first study, who were all female, were asked to rate how often they would use the listed resistance strategies. The second study required participants to interpret the connotations of the specific resistance messages derived through the first study. These responses were then compared to determine what differences existed between male and female connotations of resistance messages. Because the second study demonstrated significant differences, a third study was conducted which asked male participants to indicate their interpretations of the specific types of resistance messages. The fourth study involved focus groups of males and females independently which probed why certain types of resistance messages are used and what the relational consequences of their use are. The results of the focus groups were then used to create a questionnaire which assessed male and female perceptions of relational consequences in the use of resistance messages.

This study involved no less than six major steps which built upon each other to achieve a goal of explanation for the research topic. The benefit of multi-method studies lies in their ability to utilize the results of previous research to lay the foundation for further studies. These techniques thus can build a solid case for explanation. As the above researchers recognized, each step in the process created new questions and opened other avenues for discovery.

In the study I previously described involving the two young married couples (LeBlanc, 1994), a discovery was made serendipitously about the nature of the interview process. In that study, I interviewed the married couples together rather than separately. Upon transcribing the interview I discovered some interesting characteristics that I had not specifically set out to analyze. The couples used certain types of techniques to co-construct meaning about their relationship for the researcher. The initial purpose of the interview was to describe in depth the belief and perceptions of the marital partners about their relationship. The analysis of the interview was to examine their responses. However, upon closer inspection, how the partners interacted with each other, how they shared conversational space, and how they co-constructed meaning in the interview process also served to describe their relationship.

The discovery that how partners interact with each other and toward the interviewer in the interview process is just as important as what they say leads to further research on the co-construction of meaning within the family. In one study, I examined how families define themselves and fulfill the function of inclusion through conversational moves (LeBlanc, 1996a). In this study, I analyzed a family dinner conversation to describe how the family ratifies its definition as family in everyday talk through specific tactics. Although this study utilized a single method, conversation analysis, the impetus for the study (which

was given to me as a preliminary examination question) was an earlier study which involved other methods. This example points to another benefit of multi-method research: entertaining differing perspectives allows a researcher to "see things" which might otherwise be missed.

Building a program of study requires access to and competency in multiple methods. However, building a program of study also involves an investment of self. As in building a house, a researcher has to live with the decisions made in the process. Therefore, it is advantageous to the researcher to consider each study as a part of the whole. This suggestion does not imply that a researcher should be single-minded in the selection of topics. Yet, the selection of topics does speak to the nature of the person.

When selecting a topic, the researcher must ask him or herself how he/she arrived at that desire to know. Topics come out of our experience and perception of the world. Our experiences affect our direction and our choices. We pay attention to those things that interest us because they interest us. Discussions about a potential for pure objectivity in the researcher miss the point (see LeBlanc, 1995b). The researcher chooses a topic due to personal interests.

In my final example, I chose a topic of research specifically because of my personal experience, and that personal experience became part of the method. I studied the problem of goal-conflict in a Catholic Religious Formation

Community (a seminary) because I had lived it (LeBlanc, 1995a). In this study, the first step in the research process involved an autobiographical narrative of the experience. Although it had been seven and one half years since I had left the seminary, I had no pretenses about being completely objective about the research. I had thought and continue to reminisce about my experiences fairly regularly. I had the unique perspective of having been a participant in the culture, which is not available to the external reviewer. I also had the benefit of having not set upon the experience of the seminary as a research topic thus affecting my ability to fully participate.

To assist in the process of analysis I conducted two interviews. One interview involved a man who had also left the seminary a number of years prior. This individual did not study in the same seminary as had I. The second interviewee was a man with whom I had studied in the seminary. He and I were at the same level in the process, but he continued on after I left and eventually became a full member of the religious order.

In the interview process, I asked questions from an insider's point of view about certain rituals and activities, roles and rules of community living. When I interviewed the man with whom I had studied, he and I reconstructed specific events in which we took part and set about explicating their significance. I then took the transcripts of the two interviews and analyzed the function of those

events in defining seminary life. It is in that sense that the study was multi-method: ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological and ethnomethodological. However, the study was also cathartic and taught me something about myself as a researcher and a person. The study was part of the larger program: part of building the house.

Conclusion

Families have both a shared history and a shared future (Copeland & White, 1991). Methods which simply take snap-shots, while useful to the process of research, do not serve to build theory by themselves. As building a house requires several steps and competencies, research on the family must take the dynamics and complexities of the family into consideration. The design of family research must utilize multiple methods.

The process of research the family begins with the posing of questions: a) an initial wondering about the explanation of perceived communication phenomena, b) introspective questions about what brought the researcher to the point of wonder, c) questions which frame the wondering into constructs, d) questions about how to assess the constructs, and e) questions regarding possible directions the investigation could take. Upon defining the topic of inquiry, the

researcher must determine what tools are appropriate for the investigation, and how to integrate and in what order to integrate the use of those tools.

The current debate on which methods or methodology best serves the discipline of communication does not serve to advance knowledge. Research advances knowledge, and the advancement of knowledge helps us to grow and progress. Family communication research can advance general communication theory by its systemic perspective, but also it can assist both families and family practitioners understand the processes of communication within the family context (Petronio & Braithwaite, 1993). As family communication scholars, it is important to keep our eyes focused on the goal.

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